

Received: 1 August 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/csas.v1i1.3159>

Introduction: Trajectories of Precarity

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We live in precarious times. Life and living conditions are being compromised, policed and cramped in unprecedented ways. Breathing spaces are becoming increasingly undemocratized, controlled, and diverted as they are by the (in)visible beasts of hypercapitalism. Democracy is rendered a populist outlook rather than a societal one. It is no longer a tool to gain social justice and advocate personal autonomy rather it seems to be at ease in sleeping with the extractive neoliberal regime.

When the economy becomes transactional, as can be witnessed in the profit-driven conquest of capitalism, it leads to a taxational life and burnout society. Let it be stated that this tax is levied not just on the income generated but also on our breaths, on our time, and even on our bodies, thus diverting life conditions to the beneficiaries of this biased, coercive, and violent taxation mechanism. It would not be wrong to say that that deep state feeds itself off these taxational and outcast bodies, the new precariats of our times. Elsewhere, I have argued, “what matters for the neoliberal capitalists is a perennial source of value-generation even if it comes at the cost of disposing of humans and natural resources, throwing them into a state of perpetual crisis.” (2022) Precarity, as we see is embedded within the quotidian life of the neoliberal regime that promotes and expropriates the gig economy.

As a species, we seem to have forgotten that a society cannot exist in the absence of social structures. The continued disavowal and dissolution of these social structures are the underlying features of our precarity. The accentuated rapacity for the accumulation of wealth is so unnerving that the task of caring, a central feature of the state and organisations has been assigned to one’s purchasing ability to avail the caring services offered by delivery or non-contractual personnel. Evidently, “the cases of increased vulnerability, decimated social networks, capitalist democracy, weak bodies, chart new territories of precarity.” (Dwivedi 13)

Within this precarious system, one needs to wrestle to find solutions to the troubling questions, such as how do we breathe, how do we partake in our efforts to gain equitable access to natural resources? What about social justice in the wake of the gig economy? And, is there a way to find a new voice of optimism and hope that can mitigate the intensified grip of precarity? Can the rhetoric of constant growth be replaced with the radical practices of care and solidarity?

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This inaugural issue of *Critical South Asian Studies* deals with different forms of precarity. The five articles examine literature and film to contextualise the different trajectories of precarity that can be encountered in the 21st century. It needs to be asserted that the problems advanced in this issue are not just cinematic or textual but existential.

For example, the issue opens with Pramod K. Nayar's article titled "The Famine Projects and Digital Trauma Studies in India", which examines the two aspects of the twin projects' foregrounding of trauma: the modes of representing trauma in the digital and the consequent construction of a trauma globalectic. Conjoining instances of social injustice and suffering, Nayar suggests that the need to situate historical trauma in multiple sites and stemming from different forces and causes and yet following certain patterns – social hierarchies, unequal legislation, administrative inefficiency/indifference, all of which conspire to produce food scarcity and famine.

Lava Asaad explores how South Asian laborers in the Gulf are groundless beings with fragile roots back in the homeland in selected stories in Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* (2017). Asaad argues that the precarious situations of these immigrants, whom she also identifies as "disposable lives" are exacerbated by fraught socioeconomic and ecological structures at home (forever deprived of human and civil rights) and in the host country (always considered an Other, a foreigner).

Drawing on the first season of the nine-episode web series, *Made in Heaven*, which premiered on Amazon Prime Video on 8 March 2019, Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora examine how *Made in Heaven* navigates precarity through women's lives, a distinct and historically contingent condition produced by neoliberalism in India. Paying attention to the configurations of precarity produced through the intersectional workings of gender and class simultaneously, Anwer and Arora suggest that the show maps the ubiquity of precarity as it permeates and engulfs all life but ends with offering alternatives to perpetuating neoliberal logics of precarity and precarization.

Issues of climate of injustice, grievability, and vulnerability in contemporary India are examined by Angelo Monaco. She analyses Deepa Anappara's *Djinn Patrol on the Purple* (2020), which projects the mysterious disappearance of children from the *basti* of an Indian shantytown. By emphasising its generic hybridity and multi-voiced narrative organization, Monaco examines how the interface of precarity and resilience is thematised through a focus on the particular topography of the city, emblematic of the issues of grievability and vulnerability in present-day India.

The last article by Binayak Roy advances Lava Asaad's arguments. By focussing on Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019), Roy suggests that migrant workers are both remarkably mobile and largely disorganized, thus rendering them increasingly vulnerable in the world outside. Migrant workers, according to Roy, lead lives that can be termed "hyperprecarious". Hence, Roy goes on to advocate the formation of communities of migrant labourers in a transnational space as exhibited in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*. The article also shows how Amitav Ghosh interrogates the ways in which the Western colonial episteme has commodified nature, land, mountains, and ecology.

Together these articles chart out new trajectories of precarity and vulnerability. This inaugural issue advocates an urgent need to mark a shift from coercive, extractive, and violent forms of governmentality to radical modes of care.



References

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